

two birds on a wire

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two birds on a wire

by [Miisakee](#)

Summary

In the aftermath of one more bout of rage from their uncle, Jim and Sam talk.

Notes

Written for the 'Black Eye' square on my Bad Things Happen Bingo Card, featuring complicated sibling dynamics and a touch of tragic irony.

Title comes from 'Two Birds' by Regina Spector, because if that's not an AOS Jim&Sam song, I don't know what is.

Jim lets his head sink back. The cold metal of the barn roof leeches through his hair, through his clothes, stealing what little warmth he has. The wind's not helping either.

He's still not getting down.

Up here, it's safe. Uncle Frank can't get up to the roof, especially not when he's drunk which—Jim's face throbs in time with his heartbeat—he *definitely* is right now. The only way up requires climbing up the single woodworm-eaten ladder into the hayloft, shimmying out of the window—which there is no window-sill outside of—grabbing onto the roof-trim and pulling yourself up on pure upper-body strength alone. Even sober, Uncle Frank's too old to do all of *that*.

The wind flaps at his hair, blowing it around wildly. Every time it brushes his face, it stings.

He can sleep up here. It's not that cold. Not really. As though specifically for the purpose of proving him wrong, a shiver ripples through his body.

The stars are bright tonight—the sky above him is a mosaic of colours, blending together. Canis Minor's right above him. If he had a telescope, Jim could see Lynx and Cancer, but he doesn't. It's just him and the stars on a barn-roof.

His face throbs.

Over in the farmhouse, a good few hundred yards away from the barn, someone yells. Jim stiffens, instinctively pressing himself more firmly against the metal. Another voice yells in response. Back and forth the two go. After a few rounds, Jim picks out Uncle Frank's voice and Sam's.

Sam's back?

Isn't Sam supposed to be at a friend's tonight? He's been gone the last three days, Jim's not sure when he's supposed to be back, but he feels like it's not tonight.

Sam yells something else and Jim flinches. He doesn't know how Sam can shout back at Uncle Frank like that.

A door somewhere slams and the yelling stops.

Jim closes his eyes. He hopes Sam's okay. Even if he did go and leave Jim alone for three days.

Someone taps on the window right below him and, seconds later as Jim sits up, Sam heaves himself up onto the roof beside him. ‘So this is where you’re hiding out,’ he says. There’s a red mark on his cheek and the wind musses his dark blond hair as he raises an eyebrow at Jim.

Jim scowls. ‘You’re back early.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re never back early.’

‘I’m a man of spontaneity.’

That makes Jim snort. ‘You’ve never been spontaneous a day in your life.’

Sam shrugs. ‘I’m trying it out.’

Silence. Jim’s gaze drops to his hands, as he moves his fingers one at a time. The wind brushes through his hair, knocking his split-lip. He winces at the sting.

‘You shouldn’t provoke him, you know,’ Sam says.

‘I didn’t *provoke*...’ Jim cuts himself off, glaring at Sam. ‘Whatever. Like *you’re* one to talk. Weren’t you literally just yelling at him?’

‘Only because you wound him up.’

Jim’s gaze goes back to his hands. ‘I wanted something to eat,’ he says. ‘He was in the kitchen.’

Another silence.

Sam sighs. ‘Come here,’ he says, shifting closer. Jim flinches as Sam’s fingers come near his face. Sam pauses, keeping his hands still for a moment, before continuing. ‘You’ll have one hell of a shiner tomorrow.’ He probes at the bruise already forming around Jim’s eye. ‘It’s swelling right up. D’you know where the dermal regenerator is?’

‘In Mom’s study. In the house.’ With Uncle Frank.

Sam swears under his breath. ‘Gimme a sec,’ he says. With that, he turns and slides off the roof. Wood cracks as he—presumably—swings himself back into the hayloft.

Jim doesn’t watch him go. In fact, as he catches a glimpse of Sam’s shadow sneaking back towards the house, he just lies back down. Canis Minor floats above him, a comforting sight. Sometimes, Jim imagines climbing into his own personal starship and flying up, up, up, until he’s among the stars where Uncle Frank will never find him. Where it’s only him and the stars.

He has no idea how long it’s been by the time the window creaks again and Sam climbs back up onto the roof—might’ve been hours. Probably not though.

Over his shoulder, Sam has the first-aid kit. No dermal regenerator. Mom’s study is kept locked and picking said lock would take too much time—Uncle Frank would definitely spot him if he did that—so he’s clearly gone for the easy option and grabbed the kit from the kitchen.

Sam drops down onto the roof next to him and slaps his hip. ‘Up, let me see your eye.’

Jim doesn’t want to. He sits up anyway. Carefully, Sam pulls out the reusable icepack from the kit and hits the button to activate it. A low hum emanates from it as it freezes itself.

Once Sam’s satisfied with the temperature, he presses it to Jim’s eye. Jim hisses and tries to move away.

‘Oh, quit being a baby,’ Sam says with a roll of his eyes as he grabs Jim’s shoulder to hold him in place. ‘It’ll bring the swelling down. You know that.’

Of course. This isn’t the first time either of them have had to ice a bruise, after all.

Jim scowls, staying still as Sam once again presses the icepack against Jim’s face.

‘I can’t believe you didn’t ice it yourself,’ Sam says, as he uses his free hand to grab out a sachet of ointment from the kit. ‘You just came up here, like an idiot. Honestly, Jim, what would you do without me?’ Jim makes a face at him. It makes his lip start bleeding again, which makes Sam swear at him. ‘Don’t move your mouth, stupid!’ he says, grabbing a pad out of the kit and pressing it to the split lip.

Jim rolls his eyes. ‘Why would I have to do without you?’ he says. ‘You planning on leaving?’

He means this as a joke but Sam stiffens. It lasts only a millisecond before he relaxes and presses the pad harder against Jim’s lip. ‘No, but that’s not the point. You’ve got to learn to stand on your own two feet, kid.’

‘I do!’

‘Not enough to ice your own bruise,’ Sam says. Jim sticks his tongue out, making Sam swear again. ‘Jim, I swear, you...’

‘Where were you anyway?’ Jim asks, changing the subject.

‘When?’

‘Last few days.’

‘Sleepover, remember?’

Jim plays with his fingers, clicking the joints, one after the other. ‘I don’t get invited to sleepovers.’

‘Cause you’re a jackass.’

‘Am not!’

Sam rolls his eyes. ‘You are too, now shut up, your lip won’t stop bleeding if you keep talking. And quit clicking your fingers, that’s not good for you.’

Jim falls silent, rebelliously.

He only manages to stay silent for about a minute before he can’t do it anymore. ‘Why would you leave anyway?’

‘It was just a hypothetical scenario,’ Sam says irritably.

‘But why would I not go with you if you were gonna leave in your hypothetical scenario?’ Jim pushes.

‘Like I’d want you dragging me down, crybaby.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Jim says, shoving him. ‘Seriously, Sam.’

Sam only laughs. ‘What? It’s the truth.’

‘*Sam.*’

‘Fine, fine. I don’t know, maybe you wanted to stay here.’

‘With Uncle Frank?’ Jim makes a face.

This makes Sam flick him in the nose. ‘Stop that. No, not with Uncle Frank. For Mom.’

This is a good point. Jim can’t imagine Mom coming home from space to find both of them gone.

Once, when Jim was five, he went for a walk on his own. To him, he was going on an adventure, exploring the world like Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*. He was out there for hours, wandering wherever he liked. It never occurred to him anyone’d care that he was gone. When he found his way back, it was dark and Mom was in hysterics. She screamed at him, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him.

Mom does love him. Even though she’s been gone five years without visiting once, even though she never calls to talk to Jim, she does love him. She would care if he was gone.

He couldn’t leave with Sam.

His split-lip stings as Sam starts applying the ointment.

‘I don’t want you to leave,’ Jim says quietly.

Sam freezes. ‘... Yeah, well, I’m not planning on it.’ He smiles—it looks forced. ‘I’m stuck here, just like you.’

The red mark on his cheek is purpling.

Jim stares at it, as Sam finishes off the ointment and starts putting things away. The icepack goes away too, everything tucked neatly into its place. Sam likes it when everything is in its place.

Once it’s all away, he slings it back over his shoulder. ‘Come on. You can’t stay out here.’

Sam goes to climb off the roof, stopping when Jim doesn’t move.

‘Jim,’ he says. ‘Come on. It’s freezing.’

Jim’s fully aware of that. He still can’t make himself move. Up here are the stars and safety. Down there is Uncle Frank and danger.

Sam stares at him for a moment. He sighs. ‘We’ll sleep in the hayloft, okay?’

A second passes, then another. Finally, Jim nods and uncurls his body. Sam quickly vanishes out of view and Jim follows him. After who-knows-how-long of sitting on the roof in the freezing cold, he’s stiff and aching. It takes more effort than it should to clamber back through the window into the much-warmer hayloft below. Sam’s already inside, climbing down the ladder. ‘Put some hay together, will you?’ he hisses up at Jim as he goes.

That, Jim can do. He piles together the hay until it forms a rough bed, as Sam climbs back up with the blankets that are kept in the barn. He throws them over the hay-bed.

Jim eagerly crawls into the makeshift bed. It’s an immediate relief as he cuddles deeper. Even his face doesn’t hurt so bad now.

Sam rolls his eyes, crawling in himself. ‘Budge over,’ he says, slotting in right next to Jim. ‘If you steal the blankets, I’m throwing you out.’

'If *you* kick me, I'm throwing *you* out,' Jim retorts.

'...Touché. Gentlemen's pact?' Sam holds out a hand. 'No blanket-stealing, no kicking?'

Jim makes his expression serious and grasps it. 'Agreed.'

That's about all he can get out before he bursts out laughing. This sets Sam off too and, honestly, Jim's face hardly hurts at all anymore. Their laughing fit ends and, exhausted from the day, Jim quickly dozes off.

The last thing he knows, Sam is holding him close and Jim has never felt safer.

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